Corn Harvesting in the 1840s

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Many Fairbury area residents grew up on farms in the 1950s or 1960s. In that era, corn yields were about 100 bushels per acre. Corn was often harvested using a 2-row corn picker, which placed the ears of corn into wagons pulled behind the tractor with the corn picker.

The eared corn was transported from the field by tractors pulling the wagons to the corn crib location. The eared corn was emptied from the wagon by tipping up the wagon or using hydraulics to lift the wagon bed with corn. The eared corn fell into an elevator, which transported the ears up and into the top of the corn crib. The elevator was often powered by using the PTO (Power Take-Off) shaft from a tractor or by a separate internal combustion engine.

The wooden corn crib had air gaps between the siding boards, allowing air to circulate through the ears of corn. The corn would dry in the crib, which prevented it from spoiling. Eventually, a sheller machine came to the farm, which converted the eared corn into kernels and separated the corn cobs. The kernels of corn would be transported by a wagon or truck to a local elevator and sold.

The first white settlers in Livingston County were Valentine and Rachel Darnall. They settled on what is now Indian Creek about six miles south of Fairbury in 1830. Between 1830 and about 1853, there were very few settlers living in Livingston County. Due to a federal law granting free land to war veterans, a surge of settlers arrived in Livingston County between approximately 1853 and 1860. By the start of the Civil War, all the land in the county had been claimed by settlers.

It is interesting to research and discover how the early settlers in the 1830s and 1840s harvested their corn. These early settlers relied solely on horses as their primary power source. There were no tractors with internal combustion engines and no electricity.

The early pioneer settlers typically farmed only about 80 acres, as farming was extremely labor-intensive in that era. It was not until 1917 that the average farm size in Livingston County increased to 160 acres.

In the 1840s, if a farmer wanted to sell some of his corn, he had to take a horse-drawn wagon of corn 60 miles from the Fairbury area to Green's Mill north of Ottawa. The other option was to travel the 100 miles to the then small town of Chicago. It wasn't easy to sell grain until the railroad came through Fairbury in 1857.

Until the farmland in the Fairbury area was tiled and drained in the 1880s, most of the farmland was very swampy and often flooded. Farmers in the 1840s era were lucky to average a yield of about 30 bushels per acre of corn.

Farmers in the Fairbury area in the 1840s often grew both corn and oats. The corn was then ground into cornmeal or sold. The oats were frequently used to feed their horses. Formal crop rotation plans were not adopted until after the 1880s.

Eared corn was harvested by hand in the fields. The farmer and his children would pick the corn from the stalk and throw it into a horse-drawn wagon. The boards on one side of the wagon were higher than those on the other side, allowing corn to be thrown against the higher board and rebound, then fall into the wagon. The higher sideboards were commonly referred to as "bang boards."

Once the wagon was full of eared corn, a horse would pull the wagon from the field to the corn crib, usually located in the vicinity of the farmer's log cabin or house. Since no power sources were available in the 1840s, the farmer would typically stand in the wagon with the corn, then use a shovel to throw the corn ears up and into an opening in the top of the corn crib.

These early corn cribs were only about ten feet tall. The distance from the ground to the bed of the wagon was about three feet, and the farmer was about five feet seven inches tall. Using a corn shovel, the farmer could throw the eared corn about ten feet high.

There are almost no corn cribs left today from the 1840s. It takes 2.5 cubic feet to hold one bushel of eared corn. A corn crib 10 feet wide, 10 feet high, and 30 feet long will hold 1200 bushels of eared corn.

If the typical 1840s farm was 80 acres, and half of it was planted in corn with a yield of 30 bushels per acre, the farmer would harvest a total of 1,200 bushels of corn.

The earliest corn cribs were likely smaller, rectangular-shaped buildings about 10 feet high. If more storage capacity was needed, a second side was often added, leaving room between them to store a horse and a wagon.

In the 1840s, there was no such thing as hybrid corn seed. Each year, the farmer had to save one bushel of corn for every eight acres he planned to plant in corn the following year. If the farmer wanted to plant 80 acres in corn the following year, he had to keep and store 10 bushels of corn until planting time in the Spring.

Photography did not become widely used until the 1860s, during the Civil War. No photographs of 1840s corn cribs are known to exist today. An AI (Artificial Intelligence) computer program was used to generate an image of an 1840s farmer standing in a wagon of eared corn and shoveling the corn into a corn crib.

Farming in the 1840s was a very labor-intensive operation. Each ear of corn had to be removed by hand from a corn stalk and then thrown into a horse-drawn wagon. Then the farmer had to throw every ear of corn from the wagon into a ten-foot-tall corn crib using a scoop shovel. As farming continued to evolve with the advent of mechanization and high-yielding hybrid seeds, the amount of labor required dramatically declined.

Because photography was not in common use until the Civil War, there are no known photographs of an 1840s farmer scooping eared corn from a horse-drawn wagon into a ten foot tall corn crib. The AI (Arificial Intelligence) program Perplexity was used to generate this image of a farmer scooping his eared corn into his corn crib.